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Web site guides poor through legal system

New service is designed to improve access by offering self-help tips, practical advice

By Kate Coscarelli

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In an effort to reach out to the more than 400,000 poor New Jerseyans who need legal help each year, the state's largest legal assistance group is hitting the Internet and the airwaves.

Legal Services of New Jersey, an Edison-based corporation that coordinates the state's system of legal aid organizations, has created a Web site to help people navigate the justice system, and this week will distribute a batch of public service announcements to local television stations.

"Having access to fundamental legal information - the most frequently asked questions - can actually help (people) either get out of the relatively early stages of a legal problem they are in or avoid a legal problem they are about to get in," said Melville Miller, president of Legal Services. "This is just another weapon for us to try to break down the wall."

The new outreach efforts are in response to a study released in October which found that more than one-third of the state's poor adults have at least one civil legal problem such as a dispute with a landlord, a divorce or bankruptcy. But fewer than one in six get help from a lawyer.

Many of these people don't seek a lawyer's help because they think they cannot afford it, think the problem is not important enough or think nothing can be done about it, according to the study, which was funded by Legal Services. And few know how to find an attorney, according to the study.

One of the biggest challenges for people who need legal aid is finding the right lawyer. It is also a challenge for lawyers to find creative ways to reach clients, said William Hornsby, staff counsel of the American Bar Association's division for legal services. New Jersey's outreach efforts are limited, Miller said. Lawyers who work for Legal Services help about 50,000 people a year.

The new Web site - www.lsnjlaw.org - was designed for people with little Internet experience and who might not have good reading skills. Launched a few weeks ago, the site is getting about 1,400 visitors a week, said Lauren Countee, Web site administrator.

It is divided into 16 categories, such as "The Place I Live," and "Family and Relationships."

Each category offers links to information on topics like tenants' rights, what parents need to know about special education, and how to answer a complaint if they are sued. It also provides links to various studies, legal self-help guides, and other reference materials on topics like workers rights and how to clear a criminal record.

It also lists names and phone numbers for legal services offices, bar associations and other places people can turn to for further advice.

With the Web site already functioning, the outreach campaign will next hit television. The video clips, in varying lengths, will be distributed to all of the New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia news outlets later this week, said Tom Makin, a spokesman for Legal Services.

In one video clip, "Deanna," a young black woman with chin-length braided hair stands outside next to her daughter, and talks of Legal Services.

"I know I can go somewhere and get help when I don't understand the system and what it's doing to me. I never knew that," she says.